HAS THE CHURCH REPLACED ISRAEL?

'This is what the LORD says, he who appoints the sun to shine by day, who decrees the moon and stars to shine by night, who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar — the LORD Almighty is his name: "Only if these decrees vanish from my sight," declares the LORD, "will the descendants of Israel ever cease to be a nation before me." ' Jeremiah 31:35–36

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A Christian organisation helping the Jewish people return to Israel

WHAT DO YOU MEAN?

There are those who, as they read the Scriptures, see no further place for Israel in the purposes of God for his dealings with mankind. This belief is known as 'Replacement Theology'. It is as its name suggests — a doctrine of replacement — specifically that God has turned from using the Jewish people to using the Church and that the nation of Israel has no longer any special significance.

ORIGINS

The idea that God has finished with the Jewish people is not new. It gained a foothold in the first two centuries of the Church. Influenced by Rome and also by Greek thinking plus the influx of hundreds of Gentiles, the Church soon became distanced from its Jewish roots and heritage and took on an identity of its own. For example the Greek word 'Christos' or 'Christ' was used instead of the Hebrew word 'Mashiach' or 'Messiah'. Some early Church fathers went further and openly encouraged distance from the Church's Hebrew roots, sowing early seeds of antisemitism.

IS THERE ANY TRUTH IN IT?

We need to ask ourselves what basis of truth there is in Replacement Theology. If there were none at all then such a large part of the Church would not have been deceived by it. Something which is obviously wrong confuses no one but if a little truth is mixed with error it becomes a much more powerful instrument of deception. This is where the Church finds itself on the issue of Replacement Theology. At first glance it appears to be right. After all is God not using the Church? Is it not the Church that is reaching out to a lost and needy world while the Jewish nation, albeit once significant, now preoccupies itself in isolation with some ancient rules and regulations about Holy Days and special dietary requirements? Why then do we say that Replacement Theology is wrong? Furthermore, if it is wrong, does it matter?

WHY IS IT WRONG?

Well, first of all we notice the apostle Paul states categorically in the book of Romans[1] that God has not rejected His people Israel. This then gives a big clue that the issue is significant. Paul then goes on to explain some of God's purposes for the nation of Israel, that their hearts have been temporarily hardened against the gospel[2] so that those preaching it would turn aside to the Gentiles and thus bring the gospel message of salvation to the whole world. He also says that when as a nation they recognise their long awaited Messiah, it will bring revival to the Church[3] as Jew and Gentile become a united body of believers in the Lord Jesus for through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father.[4]

All this is wonderful but the significance of God's purposes for Israel as a nation goes much deeper. God chose Abraham and from him, his son Isaac and his grandson Jacob, the nation of Israel was brought

into being. They were to be God's people and the vehicle through which He would bring the Saviour into the world. He set before them blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience. The latter path, history tells us, scattered them to the four corners of the earth. But there was always a promise that in God's heart there was a commitment to restoration. This commitment took the form of an everlasting covenant[5] and the restoration a physical return to the land that God had given them[6] and in the fullness of time a spiritual restoration as God's people.[7] God has promised both, and the physical return to the land of Israel is a visible sign that God has not forgotten either promise. This is the key that is vital for us to understand as Gentiles in the Church.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CHURCH

The return of the Jewish people to the land of Israel is inextricably linked with the second coming of the Lord Jesus[8] and shows the world that God keeps His Word and His promises. God's character (Name) was profaned among the nations as His people were scattered throughout the world in righteous judgment. As they return we can see that God does indeed keep His Word. He is a covenant keeping God and worthy of trust. If he didn't keep His promises to the Jewish nation, He would be classed as a covenant breaker and then we would have to ask ourselves if we as Christians could be sure He would fulfil His Word to us! This is why the whole issue is so important for the Church. God has not finished with the Jewish nation. He is showing the whole world through His dealings with them that His character is flawless, that He keeps His Word once made and people can trust Him. God tells us in Ezekiel[9] that it is not for Israel's sake that He brings them back to the land but for the sake of sanctifying His own Name or character which had been sullied. If the Church does not understand this she will miss the significance of one of the most miraculous and exciting events of recent history — the rebirth of the nation of Israel in 1948. This shows us that God still has a purpose for the Jewish nation. We must remember that as they gather, it is to their Promised Land, and specifically Jerusalem, where our Saviour will physically return. It shows that the prophetic time clock is ticking. No wonder the enemy is doing all he can to cause trouble over it!

The Church then must pray for the Jewish people, befriend them, encourage their return to the land, knowing that the very character of God is the issue at stake and realizing that one day the destiny of the Church and Jewish nation will come together in glorious fulfilment of God's purposes!

SCRIPTURES USED

1. Romans 11: 1
2. Romans 11: 25
3. Romans 11: 15
4. Ephesians 2: 11-18
5. Genesis17: 7-8
6. Ezekiel 20: 41-42
7. Jeremiah 31: 33
8. Matthew 23: 37-39
9. Ezekiel 36: 22-28

Our vision is to be servants and intercessors of the Lord, to help the Jewish people return to the land of Israel from all the nations and to proclaim God's Kingdom purposes for their return.

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